

POETRY IN CLASSICAL SANSKRIT¹

It is probably true to say that Sanskrit is thought of by most people in the West chiefly as a language of Indian religious and philosophical texts. The importance of these subjects is perhaps indicated by the fact that rather more than half of the papers at this International Conference deal with them, directly or indirectly. Except among specialists, it is less well known that Sanskrit also possesses a rich and extensive poetical literature, secular as well as religious. I am sure my colleagues will agree that we who teach Sanskrit should do our best to train our students in the understanding and appreciation of the best of this poetry, which is an extremely important aspect of the artistic legacy of ancient Indian culture. Naturally, I do not mean to suggest that all Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*) is of the highest literary quality; but the best can be ranked among the great poetry of the world.

From the earliest Indian poetry in the *Rigveda*, we can trace in the later Vedic period a gradual development of the language and of metrical forms to the time of the older *Upaniṣads*. Unfortunately, it is not possible thereafter to see in detail the growth of the fully formed classical *kāvya*-style; but this is due merely to the accidental loss of earlier works. There can be no doubt that the tradition was an unbroken one. Thus, as A. B. Keith and others have shown, Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* — usually dated on inconclusive grounds c. 150 B.C., though possibly a century or more later — quotes fragments which must be from dramas and other secular poetry, already showing distinctively classical metres. It is probable also that the great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, were taking shape during the last few centuries B.C. The

1. This is an edited version of a public lecture delivered at the Conference, and most of the examples quoted were then given only in English translation. The Sanskrit originals are added here for convenience of reference, and also a few additional verses which were included in my original notes, but which had to be omitted in order to keep the lecture within a reasonable time-limit.

of poets whose works are otherwise lost. Students of Sanskrit literature must be grateful to Dr. L. Sternbach for his extensive and painstaking studies of these sources, culminating in his *Mahā-subhāṣita-saṃgraha*, the first volume of which has now been published (Hoshiarpur, 1974).

We can glance only briefly at the question of metre; but it should be observed that the rigidly controlled metrical forms of classical *kāvya* make an important contribution to its aesthetic qualities. Sanskrit metre is quantitative, and is regulated by principles virtually the same as those of Classical Greek and Latin. It has been observed that there are even a number of close similarities to Greek and Latin lyric metres: thus, the *Sārdūlavikrīḍita*,

— — — u u — u — / u u u — / — — u — — u —

where the opening segment agrees with the Glyconic,

donec gratus eram tibi.

In the *Indravajrā/Upendravajrā* (*Upajāti* when mixed in the same stanza),

u / u / — u u — u — —

we find a hendecasyllabic comparable with the Sapphic,

/ u / — — u u — u — —

intiger uitae scelerisque purus,

where the inversion of quantity in the second and third syllables produces a different ictus-pattern in the opening; but the remainder of the line is the same. Such similarities are interesting; but they illustrate at most a parallel in development, and not an Indo-European inheritance. This is clear from the fact that both in Vedic and in early Greek lyric there is considerably more freedom in quantity in certain parts of the verse.

The better poets show remarkable technical virtuosity in constructing their verses within the fetters of these elaborate and difficult metres, while at the same time producing an effect of ease and spontaneity. Lesser craftsmen are often mastered by the metre. As an example, we can compare a verse from Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* (ed. S. K. De, 81) with an imitation in Udaya's *Mayūrasaṃdeśa* (ed. C. Kunhan Raja, ii.30):

*nūnaṃ tasyāḥ prabalaruditocchūna-netraṃ priyāyā
niḥśvāsānām aśīśiratayā bhinna-varṇādharoṣṭham
hasta-nyastaṃ mukhaṃ asakala-vyakti lambālakatvād
indor dainyaṃ tvad-upasaraṇa-kliṣṭa-kānter bibharti.*

*tatra snigdhair niḥsa-parijanaṃ sapravālaiḥ prasūnaiḥ
klpte talpe tuhina-kaṇikā-śītale komalāṅgi
śete tāpa-prasāma-vidhaye nūnaṃ adyāyatākṣi
cāndrī sāndhye jalada-śakale svāṃśu-bhinne kaleva.*

In Udaya's verse, *nija-* and *sva-* are mere verse-fillers; as is also *adya*, on which the verse even so stumbles; the juxtaposition of the two senses of the instrumental is awkward: *nija-parijanañi* « by her own companions », *sapraṇālaiḥ prasūnaiḥ* « by means of flowers together with leaves »; *-vidhaye* is weak; and the comparison in the last line, « like the moon's crescent in a twilight cloud-fragment pierced by its own rays », is marred by the fact that the « own rays » must contextually belong to the moon, but grammatically appear to belong to the cloud-fragment.

The well known remark of Keats about poetry, « loaded with gold in every rift », and the same poet's assertion, « Poetry must surprise by a fine excess », are very apt in relation to Sanskrit poetry, though we may feel that the later poets often went too far. They seek to surprise us, certainly, but not rarely by an excess which is hardly « fine ». The excess, in ornamentation, paronomasia, and general tortuousness, can sometimes be so overwhelming that the poetry itself is swamped, and we are left with little to admire except the poet's purely technical skill.

At the same time, we shall miss much if through prejudice we reject the artifice of Sanskrit poetry. The skilled use of alliterations and assonances, subtly contrived, can frequently contribute much to the music and charm of the poetry. Even a device as dangerous as the *yamaka* (the repetition of several syllables without repetition of sense) can sometimes be employed with art. In the *Raghuvamśa*, ix, 1-54, Kālidāsa has a *yamaka* in the fourth quarter of each stanza, and can still achieve a natural flow of the language. For example, ix, 26:

kusumajanma tato navapallavās
tad anu ṣaṭpadakokilakūjitam
iti yathākramam āvirabhūn madhur
drumavatīm avatīrya vanasthalīm.

Then there was birth of flowers and of leaf-buds new,
And in their wake came the bees to the treeful glade:
So in due order the Spring-time appeared in view,
Bringing a singing as birds their rejoicing made.

Here I have tried in the translation to give an approximation to the rhythmic effect of the *drutavilambita* metre of the original:

u u u — u u — u u — u —

We can hardly claim much poetic merit for a string of *yamakas* such as Bhaṭṭi's (*Rāvaṇavadha*, x, 9):

na gajā nagajā dayitā dayitā vigataṇi vigataṇi calitaṇi calitaṇi
pramadāpramadā mahatā mahatām arañṇaṇi marañṇaṇi samayāt
samayāt.

The beloved mountain-born elephants were not tended, the flight of birds ceased, movement disappeared, women were bereft of joy, and

by reason of the great (fire) death not in battle in due time overtook the great (heroes).

Bhaṭṭi's epic has the double intention of telling the story of the Rāmāyaṇa, and of illustrating the rules of grammar and the main figures of poetry. Taken in context, the verse quoted has a certain appropriateness. Formally, it is in place as one of the twenty varieties of *yamaka* which the author has set himself to exemplify at the beginning of this canto; and in the story it is part of the description of the burning of the city of Lankā, and the drumming of the repeated anapaests helps to convey something of the turmoil caused by the conflagration. In the same poem (ii,4):

*niśātuṣārair nayanāmbukalpaiḥ
parṇānta-paryāgalad-accha-binduḥ
upārurodeva nadat-patangāḥ
kumudvatīṃ tīratarur dīnāḍau.*

At daybreak, the tree on the lakeside, with the clear drops of water dripping from the tips of its leaves, appeared to bewail the night-flowering lotus, as if the night-dew were the tears, and the screaming of the birds (in its branches) were the cries of mourning.

Here we have a verse in words elegantly composed: but the poetic conceit (*utprekṣā*) is quite tastelessly strained. Against this, we may cite, ii,11:

*latānupātāṃ kusumāny agrhṇāt
sa nadyavaskandam upāsprśac ca
kutūhalāc cāruṣilopaveśaṃ
kākutstha īṣat-smayamāṇa āsta.*

Ever and again, Rāma bent down the branches and plucked the flowers, and would make his way down to the streams and sip the water, and, gently smiling, would sit on the charming rocks, taking pleasure in the scenery of the forest.

This illustrates the grammatical rule (Pāṇini 3.4.56) that the so-called gerund in *-am* (*namul*) of the roots *viś-*, *pat-*, (*pad-*), and *skand-* may be compounded with the object when the sense is repeated action: yet, in spite of the artificiality, the verse is poetically quite effective. At the end of his poem, Bhaṭṭi states: *vyākhyāgamyam idaṃ kāvyam* « This poem can be approached only by means of a commentary », and I for one confess that I find this so. But I suspect that Bhaṭṭi may be teasing us here with a deliberate ambiguity, for he could equally have meant the opposite, « not approachable by means of a commentary », *vyākhyā-agamyam*: in other words, if you need a commentary, you know too little grammar for an immediate appreciation of the Pāṇinian niceties in the poem.

As we have observed earlier, consciously artistic prose is also entitled to be considered as *kāvya*. Here, free of the restrictions of metre, authors

could indulge in even more elaborate ornamentation of style, and give free play to their inventiveness and exuberance of imagination. Alliterations and *yamakas*, double senses and extremely long compounds abound; rare words and abstruse meanings are sought out, partly in order to achieve such effects, though also to display the author's erudition. As a relatively uncomplicated sample, here is part of Bāṇa's description of autumn at the beginning of chapter 3 of the *Harṣacarita* (the passage omitted is roughly half of the whole sentence):

*atha kadācid viralitavalāhake cātakātankakārīṇi
kvaṇatkādāmba darduradviṣi mayūramadamuṣi haṃsapathika-
sārthasārvātīthau dhautāsīnibhanabhāsi bhāsvārabhāsvatī
śuciśaśīni taruṇatārāgaṇe galatsunāsīraśārāsaṇe
śīdatsaudāmanīdāmani dāmodaranidrādrūhi drutavaidūrya-
varṇārṇasi pariṇāmāśyānaśyāmāke janitapriyangu-
mañjarīrajasi kṛthoritatrapusatvacī kusumasmeraśare
śaratsamayārambhe rājñāḥ samīpād bāṇo
bandhūn draṣṭuṃ punar api taṃ brāhmaṇādhivāsam agāt.*

(In the following translation, the phrases in brackets represent ideas only hinted at by the Sanskrit words employed, and are not fully developed double senses).

Now it came to pass that, at the time when the clouds have thinned out, the time which causes distress to the *cātaka*-birds, when the black-geese squawk, which is the enemy of the frogs, which robs the peacocks of their revelry, which presents all hospitality to the caravans of migrating geese-travellers, when the sky shines like a polished sword, the brilliant sun shows its brightness, the moon shines clear, the hosts of stars are new and fresh (as the eyes of lovers are tender), when the rainbow, the bow of the god Indra disappears, when the chain-lightning falls to rest (as a girl's girdle slips down over her hips), when the god Viṣṇu's slumber is disturbed, when the streams run the colour of melted lapis-lazuli when the wild rice dries in ripeness, the pollen is produced in the clusters of millet-plants, the skin of the cucumber is hardened, and the reeds smile in flower: at the time of the onset of the autumn season, Bāṇa left the king's side and returned again to that Brahman-dwelling in order to see his family.

It will be seen that the autumn season is named only when the very long sentence is almost completed; and in the Sanskrit all the items of description (where in translation I have been forced to use « when », « which ») appear as compound adjectives.

By way of contrast, we may feel that there is more sensitivity in Ārya Śūra's skilful handling of the Sanskrit language in the prose of the *Jātaka-mālā* (chapter XXV):

*jighāṃsum apy āpadgatam anukampanta eva mahākāruṇikā
nopekṣante. tadyathānuśrūyate: bodhisattvaḥ kilāṇyatamasminn*

*arāṇyavanapradeśe nirmānuṣaṣaṃpātānīrave
vividhamṛgakulādhivāse tṛṇagahananimagnamūlavṛkṣakṣupabahule
pathikayānavāhanacarāṇair avīnyastamārgasīmāntalekhe
salilamārgavalmīkaśvabhṛaviṣamabhūbhāge
balajavavarṇasattvasaṃpannaḥ saṃghananavatkāyopapannaḥ
śarabho mṛgo babhūva. sa kārūṇyābhyāsād anabhidrugdhacittaḥ
sattveṣu tṛṇaparṇasalilamātravṛttīḥ saṃtoṣaguṇād
arāṇyavāsāniratamatīḥ pravivekakāma iva yogī tam
arāṇyapradeśam abhyalaṃcakāra.*

Those of great compassion do in fact feel pity for one who is in affliction, and do not neglect him, even though he be intent to slay them. As is told in tradition, the Bodhisattva was once born as a *śarabha*-deer, in a certain wild forest region free from noise — for men did not forgather there — a forest inhabited by divers herds of deer, dense with trees and undergrowth whose roots were buried deep in the tangled grass; where neither traveller's foot nor wagon-wheel had carved any line of road or boundary: a parcel of land where there were no adversities, where the only inequalities were water-courses, ant-hills and gullies; and he had strength, swiftness, beauty and courage; and his body, compacted with muscular power, might have been wrought upon the anvil. Unremitting in his practice of compassion, his heart had no malice nor hatred against any living creature; his sustenance solely grass-blades and water, in full contentment he cherished his forest home, as if an anchorite in love with solitariness: he himself the supreme ornament of that forest region.

The *Jātaka-mālā* is an early example of the genre later known as *campū*, in which passages of prose and verse alternate. Here is another passage, in a rather different style, from a description of a sea-voyage (xiv,3-8):

*krameṇa cāvajagāhire vividhamīnakulavicaritam
anibhṛtajalakalakārāvaṃ anilabalavilāsapravicalitatarangaṃ
bahuvidharatnair bhūmiviśeṣair arpitarangaṃ phenāvalīkusuma-
dāmaṇicitram asurabalabhujagabhavanaṃ durāpapātālam
aprameyatoyaṃ mahāsamudram.*

*athendranīlaprakarābhīnīlaṃ
sūryāṃśutāpād iva khaṃ vīṇaṃ
samantato 'ntarhitatīralekhaṃ
agādham ambhonidhimadhyam īyuh.*

*teṣāṃ tatṛānuprāptānāṃ sāvāhnaśamaye mṛdūbhūtakiraṇacakra-
prabhāve savitari mahad autpātikaṃ paramabhīṣaṇaṃ prāduraḥbhūt.*

*vibhidyamānornivikīrṇaphenaś
caṇḍānīlāsphālanabhīmanādaḥ
naibhṛtyanirmuktasamagratoyaḥ
kṣaṇena raudraḥ samabhūt samudraḥ.*

*utpātavātākālitair mahadbhis
toyasthalair bhīmarayair bhramadbhiḥ
yugāntakālapracalācaleva
bhūmir babhūvogravapuḥ samudrah.*

*vidyullatodbhāsuralolajihvā
nīlā bhujangā iva naikaśīrṣāḥ
āvavrur ādityapatham payodāḥ
prasaktabhīmastanītānunādāḥ.*

*ghanair ghanair āvṛtaraśmijālaḥ
sūryaḥ krameṇāstam upāruroha
dināntalabdhaprasaram samantāt
tamo ghanībhāvam ivājagāma.*

*dhārāśarair ācchuritormicakre
mahodadhāv utpatatīva roṣāt
bhīteva naur abhyadhikaṃ cakampe
viśādayantī hrdayāni teṣām.*

And gradually they plunged onward towards the great ocean, with its teeming shoals of all manner of fishes, resounding with the inarticulate noise of the unresting waters, with waves buffeted by the wanton play of the wind's force, where colours were reflected up by successive parts of the sea-bed strewn with many sorts of precious stones, and flecked with flakes of foam — strings of pearls for flower-garlands — the home of demon-armies and sea-serpents, with water immeasurable, as deep as the lowest hell.

They reached the sea's unfathomable centre
Where the horizon showed no streak of shore:
Rich sapphire-blue, as if the sun's fierce furnace
Had smelted into ocean molten sky.

When they had arrived there, and the power of the chaplet of the sun's rays became gentler towards the day's end, there came upon them a mighty and terrifying hurricane.

With spraying spume spewed by the splitting breakers,
Whipped by the murderous blast to awesome voice,
Unleashing from restraint its water-masses
The ocean on the instant wreaked its wrath.

Vast watery plains hurled by the mighty tempest,
Staggering, uncontrolled, with fearsome force,
Seemed like the Earth at the Last Day of Judgement,
Of monstrous form, when mountains cleave and crash.

The clouds, with blazing, flickering tongues of lightning,
Like many-headed serpents, fierce and black,
Covered the sky where late the sun had trodden,
Nor ceased their echoing ruthless thunder's roar.

With failing rays by thickening clouds enclouded
 Slowly the sun moved to its setting time:
 Seizing too soon the spread of daylight's ending
 The night like storm-clouds closed on every side.

With all its waves stung by the rain-storm arrows
 The mighty ocean heaved itself in rage:
 The very ship shivered as if in terror,
 Draining all hope from every seaman's heart.

But perhaps we have dwelt long enough on some of the more rhetorical and formal aspects of Sanskrit poetry. Carefully wrought form is certainly important, but polished, sculptured language is not in itself enough. In the best of Sanskrit *kāvya*, there is no lack of the inherent poetic feeling, imagination and percipience which are essential to great literature. Tenderness, humour, pathos, a sense of beauty, all the emotions which are the common lot of humanity are there: Amaru's perceptive delineation of lovers' quarrels, jealousies, reconciliations and physical delights; Bhavabhūti's insight into the joys and sorrows of conjugal love and separation; Kālidāsa's deep feeling for man and nature.

In the *Meghadūta*, the mansion of the Yakṣa is indeed splendid, as befits a supernatural being; and the bird-perch in the garden is golden, fixed in a crystal slab and encrusted with jewels. But Kālidāsa adds a touch of humanity to the picture by introducing the pet peacock who is encouraged to dance by the wife clapping her hands (76):

*tanmadhye ca sphatikaphalakā kāñcanī vāsayaṣṭir
 mūle baddhā mañibhir anatipraudhavaṃśaprakāśaiḥ
 tālaiḥ śiñjadvalayasubhagair nartitāḥ kāntayā me
 yām adhyāste divasavigame nīlakañṭhaḥ suhrd vaḥ.*

Familiar with royal courts, he can also bring us the fragrance of damp earth newly turned by the plough (ibid. 16). In a brilliant verse, he describes the nymph Urvaśī as she regains consciousness after fainting (*Vikramorvaśīya*, i,9):

*āvīrbhūte śaśini tamasā ricyamāneva rātrir
 naiśasyārcir hutabhuja iva cchinnabhūyiṣṭhadhūmā
 mohenāntar varatanur iyaṃ lakṣyate muktakalpā
 gangā rodhaḥpatanakaluṣā gr̥hṇatīva prasādam.*

Like the night freed from darkness when the moon appears, like the flame of the fire at dusk burning almost free from smoke, she appears almost recovered from her swoon, as the Ganges, muddied by a fall of the river-bank, drifts back to limpid clearness.

We may have a common adage reflected in the light touch of humour in *Raghuvaṃśa*, vi,30:

*athāṅgarājād avatārya cakṣur
 yāhīti janyām avadat kumārī*

*nāsau na ramyo na ca veda samyag
draṣṭuṃ na sā bhinnarucir hi lokah.*

But the princess turned her eyes from the king of Anga, and said to the maid, «Pass on»: it was not that he was not handsome, nor that she could not see it, but *de gustibus...*

The context here is the *svayaṃvara* of Indumatī, the ceremonial choice of a husband by the princess from among the royal suitors; and as she passes along the row of kings, just before she reaches Prince Aja (with whom she falls in love) she inspires one of Kālidāsa's most famous similes (vi,67):

*saṃcārīṇī dīpaśikheva rātrau
yaṃ yaṃ vyatīyāya patiṇvarā sā
narendramārgātīva iva prapede
vivaraṇabhāvaṃ sa sa bhūmipālah.*

As if a walking lamp-flame in the night
On the king's highway, flanked with houses tall,
She moved, and lit each prince with hopeful light,
And, passing on, let each to darkness fall.

Similarly, in the *Kumārasambhava*, iii,54, in the description of Umā:

*āvarjitā kiṃcid iva stanābhyāṃ
vāso vasānā taruṇārkarāgam
paryāptapuṣpastavakāvanamrā
saṃcārīṇī pallaviṇī lateva.*

Stooped slightly forward by her breasts, and wearing
A bodice bright as brilliant daybreak red,
She seemed as if a walking vine-plant, bearing
Full blossom-clusters bending down its head.

In the converse situation, unnatural stillness is expressed by the simile of a painting in other Sanskrit poets as well; and its use by Coleridge in *The Ancient Mariner* is familiar:

As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean;

but Kālidāsa had done it much earlier, and better, when in the *Kumārasambhava* (iii,42) Nandin commands cessation of sound and movement in the forest:

*niṣkampavṛkṣaṃ nibhṛtadvirephaṃ
mūkāṇḍajaṃ śāntamṛgapracāram
tacchāsanāt kānanam eva sarvaṃ
citrārpitārambham ivāvatasthe.*

Throughout the forest, at his simple stricture,
Dumb were the birds, and silent were the bees:

As in a scene fixed in a painted picture,
Stilled were the deer and motionless the trees.

This brief sketch and these few examples will, I trust, give at least some impression of Sanskrit poetry, some slight indication of the literature. *Ataḥ param api priyam asti?* In conclusion, then, two epigrams of Bhartṛhari (ed. D. D. Kosambi, 107,186):

*draṣṭavyeṣu kim uttamaṃ mṛgadṛśaḥ premaprasannaṃ mukhaṃ
ghrātavyeṣv api kiṃ tadāsyapavanaḥ śrāvyeṣu kiṃ tadvacaḥ
kiṃ svādyeṣu tadoṣṭhapallavarasaḥ sparśeṣu kiṃ tattanur
dhyeyaṃ kiṃ navayauvane sahrdayaiḥ sarvatra tadvibhramāḥ.*

What most worthy of sights to see? Surely her face,

Eyes tender with limpid love.

What best perfume? The fragrant breeze which is her breath.

What sound, but her gentle voice?

What sweet savour? Her nectar lips' flower-petal dew.

What touch, but her silken skin?

What most sacred for contemplation by a man?

Young grace in her every move.

And—

*prāptāḥ śriyaḥ sakalakāmadughās tataḥ kiṃ
dattaṃ padaṃ śirasi vidviṣatāṃ tataḥ kiṃ
saṃmānitāḥ prañayino vibhavaḥ tataḥ kiṃ
kalpaṃ sthitaṃ tanubhṛtāṃ tanubhis tataḥ kim.*

« I gained all wealth and fame Fate can bestow » - What of it, then?

« I crushed beneath my foot each single foe ». - What of it, then?

« Honour through riches to my friends I give ». - What of it, then?

« Surely mankind eternally may live? » - What of it, then?